The Christmas Story

A Play In Four Scenes

BY

VIRGINIA A. GRISWOLD

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FOREWORD

In dramatizing the Christmas Story, the effort has been made to use the Bible words as far as possible. Also quotations and incidents have been introduced that would throw light on the life of the time and the thought of the people.

Such is the universality of the appeal of the Christmas Story that it could be produced in the most elaborate manner of which the imagination could conceive; or it could be given in the simplest way possible,—and it would still be wonderful, for the thought is there:—the love of God to man in the gift of His Only Son as a little child.

As an elaborate production in a large place with all facilities for scenery, properties, and costuming, it would be marvelous. Imagine the scenery for the hill-country of Judea under the magic spell of night in the tropics when the stars seem so near, and then the appearance of the supernatural light. Picture the royal palace of a Roman provincial governor in all its Eastern splendor. See the market-place at Bethlehem with its seething Oriental life of beggars and merchants, Pharisees and publicans, children and grown-ups; and then the arrival of a caravan from the East, which was as exciting to a town in that day as the latest extra edition of a newspaper in our own time. And then enter into the lowly shelter connected with an overcrowded inn, where the Child, the Messiah, the King, lies cradled in a bed of straw in a manger.

With due regard to costuming, remember that the Jewish interpretation of the Second Commandment allowed only circles, squares, or dots as ornaments or patterns in their clothing, but that beautiful colors, such as scarlet, blue, and purple, were used. There was the tunic, and over that a sort of coat, and then the turban or covering on the head to protect them from the sun. Sandals were worn on the feet. (Good ideas can be obtained from the famous Tissot pictures.) The shepherds wore garments of skins, while Herod wore royal robes, and his courtiers, the Roman toga.

On the other hand, the simplest presentation of the Christmas ("The Mass of the Anointed One") would be wonderful, for it is a spiritual drama. Its theme is the redemption of the world through love by the means of the most helpless, and yet the most powerful thing in the world, a little child. Its stage is the human heart.

A platform, an armchair for Herod's throne, an improvised manger or cradle, and the real desire of a community, children and adults, to perform the Christmas Story in all sincerity—these are necessary.

For costuming, sheets, either plain, or with borders of gingham, can be draped to represent the flowing garments of the East. Turbans can be improvised. And burlap bags with holes cut for neck and arms can be used for the shepherds. Gay-colored cretonne would do for Herod, and white cheesecloth for the angels.

Of course, any degree of elaboration between the two extremes is possible.

THE CHRISTMAS STORY

SCENE I—Shepherds in the field.
SCENE II—Court of Herod.
SCENE III—Market-place in Bethlehem.
SCENE IV—Adoration at the Manger.

CHARACTERS

FIVE SHEPHERDS—or more
ANGEL
ANGEL HOST
HEROD
SIX ATTENDANTS—or more
SINGER
FOUR DANCING MAIDENS
TWO CHIEF PRIESTS
TWO SCRIBES
THREE WISE MEN
TEN BOYS—two with pipes } or more
TEN GIRLS }
LAME BEGGAR
BLIND BEGGAR
MATTHEW, tax collector
PHARISEE
PUBLICAN
POPULACE
MARY
JOSEPH
SIMEON
ANNA

SCENE I

A FIELD IN THE HILL-COUNTRY OF JUDEA

SCENE I: *A field in the hill-country of Judea. The shepherds are watching their flocks by night. Some are sitting. Some are half-reclining as they look upward to the stars which have been their teachers for generations. At times they discuss political conditions, or topics of the day. Or again, they recall the prophecies or the law, which have been drilled into every Hebrew child from his earliest recollection. At other times they join spontaneously in those wonderful chants which they have heard in the temple service.*

SHEPHERDS. *(Singing)*

"The voice of one crying in the wilderness,
Prepare ye the way of the Lord,
Make his paths straight."

FIRST SHEPHERD. *(Looking up)* How bright the stars are to-night. Surely, the heavens declare the glory of God. How many there are! Hast ever tried to count them, Reuben?

SECOND SHEPHERD. 'Twere impossible, Judah. Dost remember how Abraham tried to count them, and he couldn't? What a wonderful heritage we have!

THIRD SHEPHERD. Yonder is Orion, and the Pleiades.

FOURTH SHEPHERD. Aye, and the Great Dipper. Look, Reuben! Yonder is a star I do not remember.

FIRST SHEPHERD. Dost remember the prophecy of Moses? "There shall come a star out of Jacob, and a sceptre shall rise out of Israel."

SECOND SHEPHERD. Yes, Judah, and the words of Isaiah, too—"The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light, they that dwell in the land of the shadow of death, upon them hath the light shined."

THIRD SHEPHERD. I love to think of it! And then the rest of it, "For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulders and his name shall be called Wonderful Counsellor, The Mighty God, Everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace."

Aye, we need such a King, for Herod is cruel and makes life intolerable for us; and Cæsar, his master, cares naught for us but to tax us to the utmost.

FOURTH SHEPHERD. But look, shepherds, the bright star grows brighter! Can it be that the Great Light will shine upon us?

OLD SHEPHERD. In all the years I've tended my flocks, I ne'er saw that star before!

SECOND SHEPHERD. Nor I, and it's fifteen years now that I've watched the stars o' nights.

THIRD SHEPHERD. Watching sheep gives a man time to think and to learn.

FOURTH SHEPHERD. Aye, and to learn of God. Thinkest thou, Reuben, that the Messiah will ever come?

FIRST SHEPHERD. Isaiah says he will.

SECOND SHEPHERD. Hast heard that a caravan

passed this way to-day going from Jerusalem to Damascus?

THIRD SHEPHERD. Aye? What's the news?

FOURTH SHEPHERD. There's a decree gone out from Cæsar Augustus that all the world shall be enrolled. And the governor of Syria has ordered that all the Hebrews must gather in the cities of their fathers.

FIRST SHEPHERD. 'Tis to tax us the more! All the world belongs to Rome! Will they never have enough, but they must take our very life blood?

SECOND SHEPHERD. Oh, if we had a king of our own!

THIRD SHEPHERD. Then had Herod best beware lest he lose his throne over us!

(Singing of ANGELS. *A great light as* ANGEL *appears.)*

FIRST SHEPHERD. Save us!

SECOND SHEPHERD. Have mercy upon us!

THIRD SHEPHERD. Spare us, good Lord!

ANGEL. Be not afraid; for behold I bring you good tidings of great joy which shall be to all people: for there is born to you this day in the city of David, a Savior, which is Christ the Lord. And this the sign unto you: Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, and lying in a manger.

*(*ANGEL-HOST *singing.)*

Glory to God in the highest,
And on earth peace among men in whom he is well pleased.

*(*ANGELS *vanish. Darkness of night again.* SHEPHERDS, *dazed, look at each other in consternation.)*

FIRST SHEPHERD. What thinkest thou?

SECOND SHEPHERD. Can it be true?

THIRD SHEPHERD. Messiah!

FOURTH SHEPHERD. Oh, if it only were!

FIRST SHEPHERD. Let us now go even unto Bethlehem, the city of David, and see this thing which is come to pass, which the Lord hath made known unto us.

ALL. Aye, we will.

SECOND SHEPHERD. Let us hasten.

(Exeunt.)

SCENE II

THE COURT OF HEROD

SCENE II: *The Court of* HEROD. HEROD *is the representative of Roman government in the province, and is officially known as Tetrarch of Judea. He is surrounded by all the pomp and splendor of an Oriental ruler. As he is seated on his throne, slaves stand beside him and behind him, slowly wielding long-handled fans. Guards stand before the throne at each side to protect him, and at each side of the entrances. Roman courtiers and a few Jewish retainers are in groups about the room, ready to listen to what* HEROD *may have to say, or to witness whatever entertainment is provided. Perhaps they have just come out from a banquet. There is much ceremony about everything that is done. An attendant enters with a goblet on a salver. He salaams before mounting the throne to offer it.* HEROD *drinks. The attendant exits. Another attendant enters from Left, and with much ceremony announces a singer, such as might correspond with the court fool or entertainer of Shakespeare's time. When the singer has finished and disappeared,* HEROD *speaks—he is bored:*

HEROD. I am weary. Give me music. Command the dancing maidens to appear.

(The music plays. The attendant exits. In a moment or so, the maidens come dancing in. The attendant re-enters. There may be one girl, there may be four girls, or it may be a ballet. They dance. Then one does a solo dance. The courtiers and HEROD *are pleased. As the dancer kneels in salaam before the throne,* HEROD *rises and in approbation places a wreath on her head, which the attendant has ready. The maidens dance respectfully out. An attendant at the Right door admits two* CHIEF PRIESTS *and* SCRIBES *of the Hebrews. Always there is the obeisance in salaam before addressing* HEROD; *and the respectful retiring afterward.)*

FIRST CHIEF PRIEST. Hail to thee, Herod, Tetrarch of Judea.

HEROD. Ha, Priest Levi, what news hast thou for me to-day?

PRIEST. Word has come even to the sanctuary of a rumor of a new savior among the Jews.

HEROD. A savior! Darest thou say aught like that to me? Knowest thou not I could kill thee for treason?

SCRIBE. 'Tis even so, oh, Herod. The rumor is abroad. I know not if it be true. But our scriptures prophesy for us a Christ.

(Enter ATTENDANT.*)*

ATTENDANT. Hail, oh, Herod! *(Obeisance.)*

HEROD. Speak, what is it?

ATTENDANT. The populace is overwrought. Excitement is everywhere. Merchants from Damascus arrived in Jerusalem to-day, saying they met shepherds in the hill-country of Judea who were traveling toward the city of David in search for a liberator of the Jews.

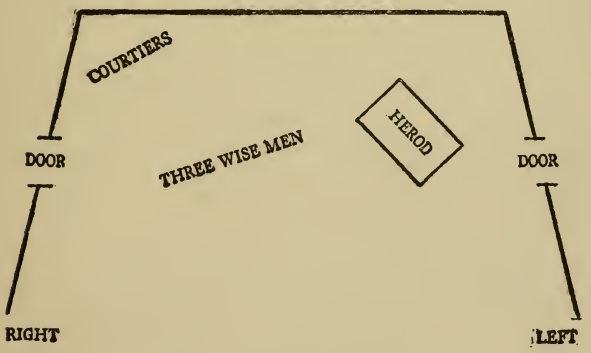
HEROD. Treason! Treason! The dogs! 'Tis a bad time for such a rumor to be about, for the Jews are gathered together in all their cities for the census-taking.

(Enter another ATTENDANT.*)*

ATTENDANT. Behold, three wise men from the East stand without with their camels. They ask, "Where is He that is born King of the Jews?"

HEROD. King of the Jews! Huh! There is no King of the Jews! But wait, I must entreat them mildly that they tell me all about it. Afterward I will find this child, and then there will be no King of the Jews, save I, and I alone! Bid them enter.

(Enter THREE WISE MEN.*)*



WISE MEN. Hail, oh, Herod.

HEROD. Speak. What seek ye?

FIRST WISE MAN. Where is He that is born King of the Jews? For we have seen His star in the East and are come to worship Him.

HEROD. King of the Jews! I would I knew!

SECOND WISE MAN. Knowest thou nothing of it, oh, Herod? We have journeyed far, ever following the star, and it brought us to Jerusalem, even to the royal palace which is fit place for a king.

HEROD. There has been no child born in this palace. Besides, a Roman is not a Jew, though Jews to-day are Roman citizens.

THREE WISE MEN. Aye, King of the Jews is what the revelation told us. And we would fain worship Him. Lo, we have brought gifts also.

HEROD. Call hither the priests and scribes of the Hebrews. *(*ATTENDANT *calls them.* PRIESTS *and* SCRIBES *advance.)* What know ye, priests and scribes, of this Christ, King of the Jews? Where was He to be born?

SCRIBE. In Bethlehem of Judea, for thus it is written by the prophet; and thou Bethlehem, land of Judah, art in no wise least among the princes of Judah. For out of thee shall come forth a governor which shall be shepherd of my people Israel.

HEROD. What time does this star appear?

FIRST WISE MAN. As soon as darkness settles over the land, and the coolness of evening comes, then it shines brightly in the East. And when we are ready to move, it goes before us as a guide.

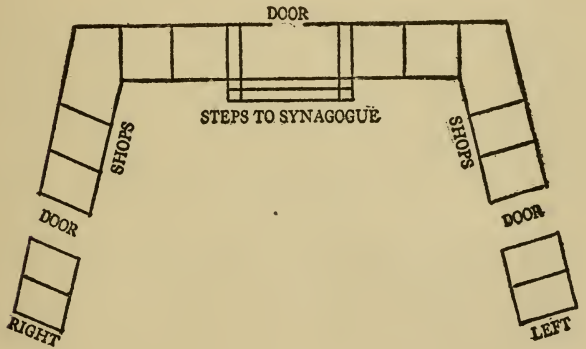
HEROD. This babe is not here. But go ye, follow the star, and search out carefully concerning the young child; and when ye have found Him, bring me word, that I may come and worship Him.

(They depart.)

SCENE III

THE MARKET-PLACE IN BETHLEHEM

SCENE III: *The Market-place in Bethlehem. Any number of children and any number of grown people can be brought into this scene. The door at the Center Back opens into the synagogue. The entrances Left and Right lead off into the narrow streets of the town. All about the*



square are open shops of merchants with their goods displayed. A group of children are playing when the curtain rises. When it is well up, they stop breathlessly. Then comes the suggestion of something else to play from the FIRST BOY.

FIRST BOY. Let's play hop-scotch!
FIRST GIRL. No, let's play wedding!

ALL. All right.

SECOND BOY. I'll be the bridegroom. *(Takes place* L.*)*

GIRLS. Deborah, you be the bride. *(*GIRLS *gather* R. *of* C., BOYS L. *of* C.*)*

FIRST BOY. I'll be the father-in-law. *(Takes place* L.C.*)*

SECOND GIRL. I'll be the mother-in-law. *(Takes place* R.C.*)*

THIRD BOY. *(To* THIRD GIRL*)* You be my wife, Rebekah.

TWELVE GIRLS. We'll be the virgins. *(They scatter to back of and* R. *of bride.)*

TWELVE BOYS. We'll be the attendants. *(Scatter back of and* L. *of groom.)*

OTHERS. We'll be the guests. *(Arrange themselves.)*

TWO *or* FOUR BOYS. *(With pipes)* We'll be the music!

*(*BOYS *with pipes take place down Right and play lively tune.)*

FOURTH BOY. *(To* THIRD BOY*)* No, Rebekah is to be my wife.

FIRST VIRGIN. You should hold your lamp in your left hand.

*(*GIRLS *start disputing over lamps. One* GIRL *pushes* DEBORAH.*)*

DEBORAH. *(Angrily)* No. I won't stand there. *(Sudden thought.)* And where is the priest?

*(*BOYS *start disputing over which one shall be priest, work out of their places, and drop down* L.*)*

SECOND BOY. *(Disgusted at seeing all his at-*

tendants drop away) Well, you boys are my attendants.

FIFTH BOY. I don't want to be. I want to be a guest and dance.

*(*BOYS *with pipes stop playing.)*

BOYS. *(With pipes)* What's the matter with all of you? Don't you know that a wedding should be gay? We've piped unto you and ye did not dance.

FIRST BOY. Well, let's play funeral, then.

(Confusion. ALL *start moving.* FOUR BOYS *start wailing.)*

FIRST GIRL. Oh, don't! *(Stops ears.)*

OTHERS. Do stop!

SECOND BOY. *(When order has been restored)* We wailed, and ye did not mourn.

FIRST BOY. We don't want to be sad. Let's play King's Court. I'll be the king! *(Takes place down* R.*)*

BOYS. We'll be your followers. *(Fall in line behind king as he starts to march across stage to* L.*)*

GIRLS. And we'll be your handmaidens. *(They dance before them and around them as they march toward* L.*)*

*(*KING *sits on top door-step down Left;* WARRIORS *group around him;* GIRLS *sit on ground all around them. As children go to side,* MERCHANTS *appear at shops arranging goods. Two or three people come out of temple (Center). One stops to buy. Enter* BLIND BEGGAR *and* LAME BEGGAR L., *leaning on each other. Lame one leads blind one to post at* R. *entrance of synagogue. Lame one hobbles down extreme*

Right and sits cross-legged. Both hold out hands for alms from passersby.)

BEGGARS. Alms, for the love of God, alms!

(Jew with long curls entering drops coin to LAME BEGGAR. *He passes across stage. Enter* TAX COLLECTOR, *Right; stops up* R.C. *at a shop.)*

FIRST BOY. Yonder goes the tax collector, Matthew. Oh, how my father hates him. He says he is traitor to his own people because he takes their money for the Roman government.

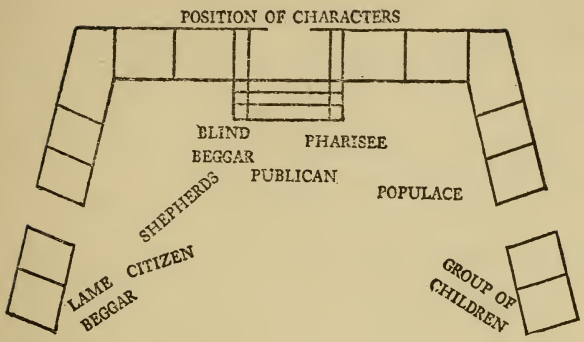
(Enter PHARISEE R.*)*

PHARISEE. *(Passing* BEGGARS *and* MATTHEW, *looks at them in disgust, and gathers his robes around him)* Thank God I am not as other men are,—extortioners, beggars, ignorant! *(Stops in front of synagogue, as if to pray, looking up.)*

(Enter PUBLICAN, *Left, crosses stage, drops coin in* LAME BEGGAR'S *hand, then up to* BLIND BEGGAR; *stops and looks at them in compassion, and is standing back to back, almost, with the* PHARISEE, *and facing down* R. *as he breathes his prayer.)*

PUBLICAN. *(Shaking his head)* God be merciful to me, a sinner!

(Other POPULACE, *men and women, pass, going to shops, or synagogue, or simply crossing. Enter* SHEPHERDS R.*)*



First Shepherd. Kowest thou aught of the Savior, which is Christ the Lord?

(Interest of all who hear.)

Pharisee. Oh, yes, the prophets tell of Him.

Second Shepherd. But He is here in Bethlehem.

(More crowd around.)

Pharisee. Impossible!

Third Shepherd. 'Tis true. Angels appeared to us in the field, and told that He had been born in the city of David.

Fourth Shepherd. And that we would find Him in a manger.

Beggar. The Lord!

Publican. A Savior!

*(*Children *all interested.)*

Second Boy. The Christ! Oh, here is a real king!

CITIZEN. There are so many strangers in Bethlehem now.

FIRST BOY. *(Coming forward)* Why don't you go to the inns? Maybe they can tell you something.

SHEPHERDS. Thanks, boy. 'Tis a good thought. We will seek until we find Him.

(Exeunt SHEPHERDS *Left.)*

(People begin to quiet down a little and start bartering again, when one of the BOYS *looks off* R., *points, and cries, "Look, a caravan!" The word is passed along by each who hears it, "A caravan!" one after the other, until there is a regular hubbub of expectancy, and all are looking off* R. *Then enter the* THREE WISE MEN, *Right, in gorgeous robes. Silence falls on all. And then the question comes, like a thunderbolt, for it is what every Jew in his heart is wishing for.)*

FIRST WISE MAN. Where is He that is born King of the Jews?

(Commotion. ALL *are gasping in joy, "King of the Jews!" Silence again. The* PHARISEE *is the doubter.)*

PHARISEE. I know of no King of the Jews.

SECOND WISE MAN. *(Nonplussed—but to the rescue of the* FIRST WISE MAN*)* We have seen His star in the East, and have followed it even to Bethlehem.

(Again commotion. The word is passed, "Star in the East!" Finally silence settles again. "We cannot tell." Then the PUBLICAN *speaks:)*

PUBLICAN. Perhaps you may find the babe among the sojourners at the inns, for there is no such child among the townspeople.

THIRD WISE MAN. Thanks, friend! Let us try, for we would worship Him.

FIRST WISE MAN. Let us go!

(Exeunt WISE MEN *Left, amid cries of "May you find Him!" and "King of the Jews!")*

SCENE IV

THE ADORATION

SCENE IV. *The Adoration. Little is needed in this scene beside the manger, save what would help to suggest the humble lodging-place, for the Babe in the manger comes trailing clouds of glory from heaven to earth. And all who come into His presence cannot but feel the power which was from the beginning of the world, and which ever shall be.*

The manger is Left Center. MARY *sits Right of it,* JOSEPH *stands Left of it. Both are watching over it, as the curtain rises, and* ANGELS, *unseen, are singing. When the song is finished,* MARY *seems almost to come out of a trance, and she sings her song of praise.*

MARY. *(Sings):*

My soul doth magnify the Lord
And my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Savior,
For He hath looked upon the low estate of His handmaiden;
For behold, from henceforth all generations shall call me blessed;
For He that is mighty hath done to me great things:
And holy is His name.
And His mercy is unto generations and generations on them that fear Him.
He hath showed strength with His arm;

He hath scattered the proud in the imagination of
their heart;
He hath put down princes from their thrones,
And hath exalted them of low degree.
The hungry He hath filled with good things,
And the rich He hath sent empty away;
He hath given help to Israel His servant,
That He might remember mercy
(As He spoke unto our fathers)
Toward Abraham and his seed forever.

JOSEPH. Mary, I am sorry this is not a better place.

MARY. We are thankful for shelter, Joseph. And wherever God is, it is well.

JOSEPH. 'Tis a beautiful child.

MARY. 'Tis a holy child.

JOSEPH. Pray God, we may be worthy of him. *(Knock at door.)* Who knocks at our door at this time of night?

(Door opens. Enter SIMEON *and* ANNA.*)*

Welcome, Simeon, to our abode. I have seen thee in the Temple, and know of thy righteousness. And welcome to thee, Anna, prophetess of the most high God, thou bringest a blessing to our house.

SIMEON. Aye, Joseph. The Holy Spirit hath revealed it unto me, that I should not see death, until I had seen the Lord's Christ. I would see the child.

MARY. Lo, here he is.

*(*SIMEON *takes child in his arms.)*

SIMEON:

Now lettest thou thy servant depart, O Lord,
According to thy word, in peace;

For mine eyes have seen thy salvation,
Which thou hast prepared before the face of all peoples.
A light for revelation to the Gentiles
And the glory of thy people, Israel.

(Returns child to manger. To MARY *and* JOSEPH.*)*

The Lord bless you and keep you!

(To MARY.*)*

Behold, this child is set for the falling and rising of many in Israel; and for a sign which is spoken against; yea, and a sword shall pierce through thine own soul; that thoughts out of many hearts shall be revealed.

ANNA. 'Tis fourscore and four years, as a widow, I've served in the temple and prayed for the redemption of Jerusalem. I thank God that mine eyes have seen the Messiah, the Anointed One, the Christ!

(Knock. JOSEPH *opens door, enter* SHEPHERDS.*)*

FIRST SHEPHERD. Good even, sire. 'Tis an unseemly hour to knock, but we seek the Christ, and have traveled far afoot from the hill-country where we tend our flocks. And all day we have sought in Bethlehem even until now.

JOSEPH. Come in.

SECOND SHEPHERD. An angel appeared to us by night in the field, praising God; and the glory of the Lord shone round about him, and we were sore afraid.

JOSEPH. Yes!

THIRD SHEPHERD. But the angel said, Be not afraid; for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy which shall be to all people.

FOURTH SHEPHERD. And then he told us that here in the city of David, was born a Savior, which is Christ the Lord. And that we should find him wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger.

FIRST SHEPHERD. Even as he spoke there appeared a multitude of the heavenly host singing, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among men in whom he is well pleased."

MARY. 'Tis wonderful!

SECOND SHEPHERD. So we made haste to come to Bethlehem to see this thing which is come to pass.

JOSEPH. Can all this be true?

SIMEON. This is the Savior, indeed!

JOSEPH. Lo, here is the child in the manger, wrapped in swaddling clothes, even as the angel told.

SHEPHERDS. The Messiah is come, the hope of our people! *(Kneel.)*

(Knock. SHEPHERDS *move down* L. *Enter* THREE WISE MEN R.*)*

FIRST WISE MAN. Hail!

JOSEPH. Enter.

SECOND WISE MAN. Where is he that is born King of the Jews? For we have seen his star in the East, and are come to worship him.

JOSEPH. King of the Jews?

THIRD WISE MAN. Aye, King of the Jews! We have followed this star from the East to Jerusalem even to the palace of Herod. But the priests and scribes said that your scriptures named Bethlehem of Judea as his birthplace. And so we are come hither.

FIRST WISE MAN. But God has warned us in a dream not to return to Herod, lest he hurt the young

child's life. So we shall go back to our own country another way. But the star even now stands over this house.

JOSEPH. This is the young child, and this is Mary his mother.

FIRST WISE MAN. Allelujah!

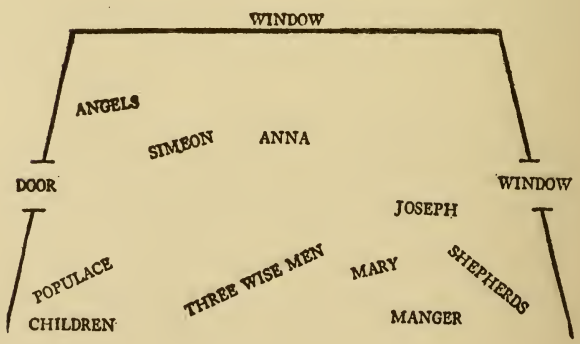
SECOND WISE MAN. Great is Jehovah!

THIRD WISE MAN. Wonderful are his ways!

FIRST WISE MAN. Accept our gifts, O Lord, the best we could bring, gold, frankincense and myrrh. But more than that, accept our homage and our lives, O King!

(They kneel. CHILDREN *file on and kneel.* POPULACE *file on, and then* ANGELS. *Ensemble singing "Glory to God.")*

FINAL TABLEAU



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